

# ROBERT BURNS

An Address by SALEM HYDE at the Dedication of the Burns Statue in the  
Syracuse Public Library  
in Memory of

## WILLIAM COWIE



1914

The highest honor still it is,  
Though blazon'd on no shining roll ;  
To stand among the only great,  
The noble and the pure of soul !

—William Cowie, *Latter Day Poems*, 1904.

SYRACUSE PUBLIC LIBRARY  
LOCAL HISTORY DEPARTMENT

THE BURNS STATUE



### THE BURNS STATUE

By J. MASSEY RHIND

The original was presented to the City of Pittsburgh by Andrew Carnegie. A copy, the gift of George Timmins and J. William Smith, in memory of William Cowie, stands at the entrance to the main floor of the Syracuse Public Library.

## THE COWIE MEMORIAL

William Cowie was born October 7, 1846, at Brechin, Forfarshire, Scotland, and died in Syracuse November 15, 1913. He had held responsible public offices in Syracuse including those of mayor and postmaster.

His position in the community was unique. Respect for his business judgment, admiration for his executive ability and recognition of his talent as a writer of verse were blended with an affection for the man, such as few public officers in this city have enjoyed.

One of the many evidences of this affection for Mr. Cowie was the gift on the part of two of his friends who are members of the Board of Trustees of the Syracuse Public Library, of the small statue which now stands opposite the bust of Mr. Carnegie in the entrance to the Carnegie Building in Montgomery Street. This is a reduced copy in bronze of the statue of Robert Burns by J. Massey Rhind, presented to the City of Pittsburgh by Andrew Carnegie. Six of these copies were made. The one which stands in the Syracuse Public Library was presented at a public ceremony on October 7, 1914. Invitations were issued to members of the Caledonian Club, representatives of the Syracuse University, of the Public Library and of the city and relatives and friends of Mr. Cowie. The statue was unveiled by William Cowie Haight, the grandson of Mr. Cowie.

The main address of the occasion was made by

Salem Hyde, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Library and the life long friend of Mr. Cowie. This address forms the substance of this pamphlet. Other remarks were made by Charles Andrews, former Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York, J. William Smith of the Board of Trustees of the Library, Professor John E. Sweet, Dr. Ezekiel W. Mundy and Dr. William K. Wickes.

The statue is so pleasant a memorial to an eminent and beloved citizen, and Mr. Hyde's address so worthy and appropriate a tribute to the great poet, that the publication of this pamphlet by the Library follows as a fitting sequel, the published record of a beautiful expression of friendship.

PAUL M. PAINÉ

## ADDRESS OF SALEM HYDE

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

The City of Pittsburgh is the proud possessor of a bronze statue of Robert Burns. This statue is heroic in size, surpassingly beautiful as a work of Art. It is a striking portrait—the genius of the man smiling in amiable beauty through the hard metal—the plow-boy poet resting on his plow.

To J. Massey Rhind, a sculptor widely famed in our time—the son of a sculptor widely famed in his time—as the creator of that noble monument to Sir Walter Scott in Princess Street, Edinburgh, Mr. Carnegie gave a commission for this work. The heart and soul as well as the genius of the artist went into this monument for he was not only skilled in his art, ambitious to add to an ever-growing renown, but he too was a Scot and a lover of Burns, and into his plastic models went not alone the art to which he is wedded, but the love which the inspired bard of his native land had quickened in his heart and whose genius had warmed him to this effort.

Now this is what lifts art from the common-place, clothing it not only with dignity and power, but with the sweetness and grace which touch the hearts of men. This is why people gather around that statue in loving admiration for the subject and with gratitude in their hearts for the artist who created it. Six smaller replicas of that statue were made. They were eagerly sought for and were given conspicuous places in worthy libraries and galleries. Two generous sons of our own city, friends of the artist, were privileged to see this work. They were Trustees of the Syracuse Public Library. They loved the Library, they loved Syracuse, they loved

Robert Burns, and they loved the memory of a man whom the residents of Syracuse have loved and honored, and who was in the generous, kindly qualities of his heart, and in the power to express himself poetically, more like Robert Burns than any other of our citizens—William Cowie.

And so intuitively flashed into the minds of these men this thought: Here is this beautiful statue of that wonderful Scotch Poet, who has won all hearts,—here is our friend who employed the leisure of his life in gathering memorials of Robert Burns and discoursing eloquently in public and in private of his genius and of his lyric power. Here is this noble building where one of the sweetest, purest, sanest, and best of our citizens has devoted nearly a lifetime to gathering for its shelves the world's best literature, and here *we* are. Let us bring these men, these ideals, these inspirations together. Let the artist be represented by his masterpiece, the poet speak from enduring bronze, as lasting as his own great fame; let his loving interpreter, who lived and wrought in our own midst be memorialized, and let it be under the guardianship of our beloved Librarian. This October 7th. was selected as it is the anniversary of the birth of our former mayor, postmaster and friend whom all citizens are delighted to honor in this appropriate way. Now this, it seems to me, was a beautiful and inspiring thought, and here we gather to witness its realization. I wish we might get into our hearts the meaning of all this. I wish we really could grasp the significance of what these men have done. I wish they might themselves grasp it. They would not need to look for further honors. The lovers of Burns will be their lovers and admirers for many years to come, and the love

of our fellows is the highest prize offered us this side of heaven.

\* \* \*

Poor dear Burns—what a genius he was, what a loving heart he had, what weakness of will, what tumults of passion, what suffering, what distinction for a time and finally what neglect. Humanity itself with its upward struggles, its fierce wrestling with evil, its falls, its miseries, its glories, its remorse, all typified in this one human life. This glorified farmer and gauger of spirits, tied down to menial tasks, yet singing the songs to which the hearts of millions respond, and which we cannot read or sing today without a tenderness of feeling toward the inspired poet himself and with a wider love, sympathy and pity for all human kind.

As a representative of the Board of Trustees, I am requested to accept for the Library this splendid gift. It comes from George Timmins, the President of the Board, upon whom this pleasant duty, save for his modesty, would fall, and from his associate and friend, John William Smith, who has served as a member of the Board longer than any other Trustee.

\* \* \*

A reviewer or a critic of the poetry of Burns, I cannot profess to be. On the canons of criticism and the principles of the art of poetry I cannot learnedly discourse. To an inspiration that is genuine and a form that is finished and perfect, however, I do not feel myself wholly unresponsive. In literature, in art, and in poetry, I know what touches my heart and inspires my soul. Skipping some of the songs, which may not appeal to what is best in

morals and habits, but which finds to some extent excuse in the looseness and intemperance of the times and surroundings of Robert Burns, the great body of his poetry has an irresistible appeal the world over.

There has been a vast amount of speculation as to what Robert Burns might have produced had he been a man of normal appetites and well governed passions; had he lived correctly and lived to the age men feel themselves entitled to live.

But who knows whether any other kind of a Burns could have produced what he produced—touched the hearts of generation after generation as he has done, is doing, and will do while men have hearts to feel and brains to think. I think not. He suffered as we suffer, gloried in the things in which we glory, loved as we love, hated as we hate, pitied as we pity, gave, as the loving and self-sacrificing amongst us give. He touched humanity everywhere, laughed with the most joyful, cried with the most sorrowful, rose to the loftiest heights from which, like others, he sometimes fell. Weak, very weak, we say, though very, very strong. We have only to read his life to see how he fought his besetting sins, how he suffered, what remorse he felt. God made him, shall we remember or shall we forget some of these things? I think we will forget. There is so much that is beautiful to remember. "Mary in Heaven," "The Cotter's Saturday Night," could have been written by no man unswayed by the loftiest religious feeling and the tenderest emotions of which the human heart is capable. Let us remember what he gave us that is sweet and true and beautiful and good. Let us forget what time, circumstances and temptation and sickness and poverty

drove him to. Let us remember the brave devoted son and brother, who when a stout-hearted, sturdy, devout and loyal father's health failed, took up at a tender age and struggled on manfully doing that father's heavy work. Let us remember his generosity. His native genius breaking through these bands of steel at last attracted the attention of those in higher station. The result was the publication of that now rarest of rare books, the famous Kilmar-nock edition of his poems. Later this was taken up by the Edinburgh representatives of Scotland's nobility and learning and that rare first Edinburgh edition saw the light—placing in Burns' hands a substantial sum of money. A very large proportion of this money was immediately handed over to relieve a worthy brother's pressing financial needs. And then later on, when failure in farming and broken health and a nation's forgetfulness had reduced him to poverty, how bravely and patiently he took up a distasteful and menial task struggling on loyally to the end to provide food and raiment for wife and children. He often repeats that it was solely to make provision for his increasing family that he submitted to the degradation of—

Searching auld wives' barrels,  
Och, hon! the day  
That clarty barm should stain my laurels!  
But what 'll ye say?  
These movin' things ca'd wives an' weans  
Wad move the very heart o' stanes.

That he felt keenly the slur attached to the name of gauger is certain, but it is honorable to him that he resolved bravely to endure it for the sake of his family. It is true that discouragement, even bitterness, sometimes found vent in his letters, but many

acts of kindness could be related to demonstrate the genuine human heartedness of the man. "No wonder," says Principal Shairp, "the peasantry of Scotland loved Burns as perhaps people never loved a poet before. He not only sympathized with the wants, the trials, the joys, the sorrows of their obscure lot, but he interpreted these to himself and interpreted them to others, and this, too, in their own language made musical and glorified by his genius. He made the poorest plow-man proud of his station and his toil, since Robbie Burns had shared and had sung them. He awoke a sympathy for them in many a heart that otherwise would never have known it. In looking up to him the Scottish people have seen an impersonation of themselves on a large scale—of themselves both in their virtues and in their vices."

\* \* \*

It has been my own good fortune to journey through Burnsland, to see his humble birthplace and the homes and haunts of his later life, the monuments to his memory, places made famous in his poems and to listen to some of the old people of the neighborhoods tell the stories they knew of Burns, and with broken voices to tell of the love in which his memory was held. It is impossible for me to believe that anyone taking up the study of his life and works, no matter how unsympathetic the attitude might be at the start, would not in the end have a very, very tender spot in his heart for the man himself and a very high appreciation of the marvelous charm of the great body of the verse he wrote.

\* \* \*

The appeal of Burns, however, is not alone to the hearts of the peasantry. One of the surprises when

undertaking the study of this man and his work is the number of really great biographies that have been written about him. To mention some of them, there are Currie, Chambers, Sir Walter Scott, Lockhart, Principal Shairp, Carlyle, John Stewart Blackie. Many of the older ones have been printed in edition after edition down to the present time. Lockhart, whose life of Scott is classed by competent critics as second in the list of really great English biographies, Boswell's Johnson being the first, and whose life of Burns is now being re-printed in a sumptuous, illustrated, two-volume edition by one of the great English publishing houses, shows what an enduring hold this man, *as a man and as a poet*, has on the reading public down to the present day. The essayists and critics write of him voluminously, his poems and songs are running through the presses in fine editions, cheap editions and selections unlimited. Scholars, preachers, teachers, lecturers, quote from him, write and talk about him, commit his immortal words to memory—some to criticise, some to point a moral it may be, yet mostly because of the charm of his verse and because they can't help loving the man.

Another surprise to me was a directory I ran across the other day of Burns Clubs and Scottish Societies on the roll of the Burns Federation—sixty-nine of them in the cities and towns of Scotland. And then the register of Burns Clubs not on the roll of the Federation, over seventy of them in the cities and towns of Scotland, England, the United States and Canada; and there are many, many, not included in these lists. Then there is the Burns Chronicle and Club Directory, published annually in a good-sized volume giving accounts of meetings, celebrations,

anniversaries—the great statesmen and orators of the English-speaking world participating, delivering addresses and notable orations on this inspired Plowboy Poet. This, too, was a surprise to me, and so I cannot but feel that this little gathering of ours is a somewhat notable one—that the unveiling of this statue in the presence of the donors who gave it, under the shadow of the bust of Mr. Carnegie (the work of the same artist), who himself has written and spoken so eloquently of Scotia's Bard, and in the presence of Mr. Cowie's family and other distinguished citizens in this fine building where the literary life of our city centers, and over which our good Mr. Mundy is the presiding genius, is an event of profound significance in the intellectual and educational advancement of this our city with its classic name, with its great University, its many schools and notable scholars. I only wish that we had taken the matter up in time to have arranged for some distinguished literary man and orator to be with us, and thus to have given the occasion that appropriate intellectual setting which it so richly merits.

Onondaga County Public Library  
Syracuse, New York